Hundreds of Watercraft Show Up for the Return of Rio Grande Race, Some Sturdier Than Others

By Lloyd Jojola

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Those shiny minnows made room for hundreds of other water-going creatures and weird contraptions Saturday, as the dormant "Great River Race Down the Rio Grande" made its glorious return.

"Cool stuff. I'm so glad they brought it back," Loraine Harding, captain of the SS Integrity, said as the fourperson team prepared to put its vessel on 50-gallon plastic drums into the brown water near Tingley Beach.

An armada of about 400 watercraft, from canoes and kayaks to rafts and home-engineered ships, and more than 1,000 people took part in the event, said Jay Hart, director of the city Parks and Recreation Department.

The race had been an annual city sight until 13 years ago—the lack of an adequate supply of water being one of the factors in its hiatus.

"We knew we were going to have great water this year for this, and (Mayor Martin Chávez) said, 'You know, let's do it again.' You can obviously see people are ready for this."

"The enthusiasm people have down here this morning is off the charts," said city Transit Director Greg Payne, who looked more like Johnny Depp in a tri-cornered hat and long, black wig. He manned the SS ABQ Ride.

"I think half of the fun is coming down here and participating," Payne said. "Whether or not your boat makes it is beside the point."

But lifejackets were required. And some evidently went to great lengths, others not as far, to make sure their boats were water-worthy.

"We tested it out, yeah, in my dad's pool," said Manny Bran, who commanded, not the pirate's ship, but the Pile-O-Ship. The river-going vessel was kept afloat by a grid of twisting-and-turning PVC pipe.

The SS Integrity had some brain power behind its build.

"Well, the two of us are nuclear engineers, so we know a little about plumbing," Lee Harding said, referring to himself and shipmate Thomas Quirk. "So we were able to do buoyancy calculations— crude buoyancy calculations."

About 20 man hours—the last coming between 6 and 10 p.m. the night before the race—went into building the craft that used part of a plastic "Imperial Walker" from an old "The Empire Strikes Back"-themed children's swing set.

Entering the water, there were no concerns about the "integrity" of the raft?

"None at all," Lee Harding affirmed.

"That's the name of the boat," Quirk was quick to remind.

"We're 100 percent sure that it will float down," Harding said, "with or without us."